PRIVATE ARCHIVES AND THEIR PROBLEMS

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Archives are the most reliable, universal and the most inexhaustible source for the increase of knowledge : reliable because they are not merely truthful witnesses but themselves an actual part of the facts; universal because there is no form of human activity which may not produce them or to which they may not apply; inexhaustible because it is no exaggeration to say that they survive in uncounted millions. That they should be properly and sufficiently preserved and made adequately available for study is a national interest of the first importance.

Whatever may be the form or custody of private archives, they should be protected from dispersal, destruction and neglect.

The importance of the papers of families of standing in various spheres of activity can not be ignored. They often include portions of institutional or official records and as such they are source material for the history of local administration.

They are often less formal and more revealing than public records and supply useful complementary information. They throw light on some very obscure aspects of Indian History. The acquisition of these records for scientific preservation and historical research will be of tremendous benefit to the cause of education. Much has been done in recent years to advance research work in the field of history and many valuable records and documents have been unearthed but more intensive research is still needed before the past could be properly constructed and many a document still be hidden from view, buried in oblivion, awaiting the magic touch of some scholarly hand for seeing the light of the day.

Important Government records are occasionally found in family collections. It often so happened that when an army was on the march, the headquarters were frequently changed and thus many important papers were lost or mislaid and they later found their way either into private hands or private collections. High officials of the government often proceeded on leave or went home after retirement with the papers which were regarded by them as personal papers, although they were produced during the course of official transactions and received by the officials in their administrative capacity and were never returned to the office. The papers found a place in their private collections. Wars and civil disobedience also inevitably caused the loss of records from the archives, for instance, when the capital is shifted hurriedly from one city to another, hazards to archives are inevitable.

The private owners must be made conscious of the importance of their archives and a relationship should be developed so that they may welcome the assistance and advice of the Government and may be persuaded to donate

the collections or sell them at a nominal price of the Government. To achieve this object following measures are suggested :

(i) to make publicity through Radio, press and public officers,

(ii) establish Local Records Survey Committees with a provision to co-opt certain influential persons as members,

(iii) utilize the services of voluntary workers,

(iv) secure the co-operation of local authorities, museums, libraries and other learned institutions,

(v) appoint an official unit headed by an officer with expert technical knowledge to make an immediate survey of collections, information about which is given to the office, as well as comply with requests for help and advice,

(vi) hold conferences at regular intervals at various places to give an opportunity for useful discussion,

(vii) hold exhibitions of archives of the district headquarters to encourage people to realise the importance of archives,

(viii) make sufficient provision for funds to buy important collections if the owner is neither willing to donate nor deposit them with the Archives and,

(ix) on the demise of a prominent person, a tactful approach to his relatives can sometimes ensure the preservation of important papers which would otherwise be immediately destroyed, although the time may not be appropriate to suggest their deposit in an archival repository.

Genarally the owners of private archives are mistrustful of Government interference due to several reasons:

(1) They fear that their archives may reveal certain unknown facts, the publicity of which might harm them;

(2) they consider that they have collected treasures that can be sold at a good price in case of need; and

(3) they do not want to part with them for reasons of sentiment.

To eliminate such notions, the owners must be convinced that the Government does not want to interfere with their records. Once cordial relations between Government and owners have been established and clearly defined, it is easier to tackle the problem. In such cases, the Archivist must act in the following ways :

(i) Encourage the keeping of records in a scientific manner even while in the custody of the owner;

(ii) try to persuade and convince the owners of the desirability of the transfer of their records to Government custody, either by gift, purchase or permanent loan;

(iii) if the owner is reluctant to deposit his collection with the Government, every endeavour should be made to borrow them for copying;

(iv) the records should be administered in such a way as to ensure their proper preservation and officers of the department with technical knowledge must be deputed at regular intervals to give instructions for protection against dampness, fire, insects, burglars or other risks. If the owner is not financially in a position to meet the expenses incurred in the preservation and safety of his collection adequate financial assistance may be provided.

(v) owners may be requested to give access to the archives to researchers; and

(vi) every State Archives should have a separate section for the deposit of private archives and afford the same technical facilities as to the Government archives. The deposits should be kept separate from each other and every collection should bear the name of the depositor or his family. In other words, the depositor should feel the same confidence about his records being in a public repository, as he feels about the bank where he keeps his valuables in a safe.

Descriptive lists of these records should be prepared for publication. The purpose of descriptive lists is to give a reader a summary description of each record, so that preliminary searching can be conducted without reference to the records themselves. The information contained in each record is presented in as condensed form as possible but it must be sufficient to inform and enable the reader to select the record likely to be relevant without the necessity of examining the original.

It should describe the name and address of the writer, name and address of the addressee, date and year of letter, subject matter, folio/pages, condition (complete or incomplete) and the accession number.

In describing the subject matter of each record, the following points are to be kept in view :—

1. Preservation of the order of the subjects as they are mentioned in original records.
2. Length of record, in pages/folio is added at the end of the descriptive entry.
3. Records, if incomplete, are to be noted.
4. Significant wordings and spellings are to be maintained.
5. Enclousers of all letters to be dealt with in the same detail as covering letters themselves. Entries for these are added after those of covering letters.